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ABSTRACT

Findings from an action research study that sought to understand the partnership process from the perspectives of persons involved in a partnership project, the Cooperative Alliance for Gifted Education (CAGE), are presented in this paper. The CAGE project utilized three partners in Ohio--Kent State University, the Cleveland Public Schools, and International Business Machines (IBM)--to enhance educational programming for minority and/or educationally disadvantaged students in both regular and gifted education. Methodology involved interviews with 22 members of the Joint Partnership Advisory Council, who represented community and state agencies, businesses, schools, and universities. Participants shared a definition of partnerships as dynamic, evolving entities that feature collaboration among persons of equal status. Critical components are mutual understanding and respect for differences, communication, and utilization of human as well as financial resources within a decision-making framework. This research offers a beginning in the development of a sociocultural view of the partnership process. A figure depicting CAGE relationships is included. (15 references) (LMI)

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Business, Community, Schools, and University Perceptions of the Partnership Process: An Action Research Study

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Our nation is currently engaged in a massive effort to reform education. Embedded within many reform initiatives are references to the development of educational partnerships. The blueprint for reform outlined in America 2000 (1991), for example, notes that "achieving the [national] goals requires a renaissance of sound American values-- proven values such as the strength of family, parental responsibility, neighborly commitment, the community wide caring of churches, civic organizations, business, labor, and media" (p. 21). Clearly, this broad-based approach to educational reform emphasizes the promotion of community collaboratives on behalf of school districts and students.

Definitions of "educational partnership" vary in formality, from "collaborative alliance in support of education" (Otterbourg & Timpane, 1986, p. 60) to

> a mutually supportive arrangement between individual volunteers, businesses, government agencies, and community organizations with a school or a school district often in the form of a written contract in which partners commit themselves to specific objectives and activities intended to benefit students (National Association of Partnerships in Education [NAPE], 1991, p. 6).

Regardless of definition, the development of partnerships as a means of addressing educational problems is widespread. Since the mid- 1980's, the number of educational partnerships has been escalating rapidly with some estimates as high as 40,000 formal partnerships (Otterbourg & Timpane, 1986). A recent NAPE survey (1991) suggests that 29.7 million students, or over 65% of the current school population, attend school districts that have educational partnerships.

Although commitment to the development of educational partnerships appears to be significant, the partnership process has yet to be studied in a systematic and comprehensive manner. To date, annual project reports, descriptive histories, or evaluations of discrete components of partnership projects have provided the bulk of available information. This literature commonly includes lists of characteristics of or conditions for effective partnerships. Examples of such lists include (a) potential problems of partnerships (Otterbourg & Timpane, 1986); (b) generic elements of educational partnerships (Grobe, 1990); (c) central elements of collaboration (Caplan, 1988); (d) factors underlying characteristics of interorganizational relations (Ash, 1989); and (e) salient themes of partnership arrangements (DelPizzo, 1990). Strong leadership, careful communication, and planning for program development emerge from the literature as key elements of successful partnerships (Shaklee, Padak, Barton, & Johnson, 1991).

Intriligator (1986) studied several partnerships between 1978 and 1985, including voluntary educational

collaboratives, a school-university collaborative, and partnerships of schools, businesses, and communities. She found that environments conducive to establishing partnerships include such factors as seed money and organizational norms that reward collaboration. Her results also suggest that participants in a partnership function at two levels, as organizational representatives and as individuals and that active participation in a partnership effort increases the home agency's commitment to the project.

Further research is necessary to understand the development and maintenance of educational partnerships. Descriptions of the partnership process from the perspectives of persons engaged in them may be especially important. Such descriptions, currently missing from the literature, can provide a socio-cultural perspective of the partnership process. Weade and Green (1989) outline the basis for this perspective:

> ... a concern for understanding the social construction of meaning from the perspective of members of a particular social group and the assumption that meaning is context dependent.... Central to this perspective is the view of everyday life as constructed by participants in social situations as they interact and work together to construct meaning within the events of everyday life. Meaning, therefore, is

situated in everyday actions and interactions of members of a social group (p. 2).

Knowledge of partners' perceptions of the partnership process is important locally, for those engaged in particular partnership projects. It is also important more broadly, for those attempting to understand and support educational reform through partnerships. The present action research study provides a beginning in the development of a socio-cultural view of the partnership process. It sought to understand the partnership process from the perspectives of persons involved in a particular project, the Cooperative Alliance for Gifted Education (CAGE; Shaklee, Barton, Padak, & Johnson, 1990).

Method

Informants

The CAGE project, funded by the U.S. Department of Education in 1990, focuses on the development of effective partnerships to facilitate high quality educational programs for tomorrow's technology-based communities. It utilizes the strengths and resources of the three partners, Kent State University (KSU), Cleveland Public Schools-- Kennedy Marshall Cluster (CPS), and International Business Machines (IBM), to enhance educational programming for minority and/or educationally disadvantaged students in both regular and gifted child education.

Multiple partnerships are embedded within the CAGE

project (see Figure 1). An important one, the Joint Partnership Advisory Council (JPAC; see Figure 1) was created to have an integral and active role in all project components. The JPAC consists of representatives from the three partners, community agencies (e.g., public television, museums, hospitals), and businesses in the greater Cleveland area. The local community college and the state Board of Regents are also represented on the JPAC. Rather than simply providing financial assistance for the project, the JPAC serves as the advisory body for the formulation and implementation of specific plans to meet goals and objectives, for problem solving, and for ongoing program evaluation.

As one component of the CAGE evaluation process, 22 JPAC representatives were interviewed in early summer, 1991, shortly after the project began. These persons were partners (i.e., KSU faculty, CPS administrators, IBM state education advisor; N = 7) or represented community agencies (N = 5), universities (N = 5), businesses (N = 2), school districts (N = 1), or the state Board of Regents (N = 1). The project director (referenced below as "staff") was also interviewed. At the time of the interviews, the partners and the project director had discussed the project at some length. The other JPAC members had recently begun involvement with the project. All had agreed to represent their agencies on the JPAC. They had attended an introductory JPAC meeting at which the goals of the project were explained or had met individually with the project director. In addition, all had received written information about the project.

Data Collection and Analysis

Interviews were conducted individually, by trained research assistants, at the convenience of the persons being interviewed. Interviews ranged from 30 to 60 minutes in length. All were tape recorded and later transcribed for analysis.

The semi-structured interview questions focused on informants' perceptions of the goals of the project, their views about how the CAGE project and their agencies might assist one another, and their expected levels of personal involvement in the project. Questions seeking definitions of "partnership" and speculations about variables leading to or barriers preventing success of the project were especially important for the current study.

Two of the researchers collaborated in the data reduction and analysis process. The process first involved identifying data congruent with the research goals, a procedure facilitated by the software program Metamorph (Thunderstone Expansion Programs International). Metamorph is inquiry software that permits the user to (a) query data using everyday English and (b) block and move portions of data into other files. The entire corpus of interview data was searched for portions relating to definitions of partnerships and the formation of partnerships. Pertinent quotations from the interviews, along with enough of the conversational context to understand the quotation, were blocked and moved into other files.

These reduced data were then combed for patterns or regularities (Goetz & LeCompte, 1984; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Inductive analysis uncovered tentative categories, which were then refined through the constant-comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

Results

Data analysis yielded three major domains that together describe informants' perceptions of the partnership process. One domain consisted of definitions of partnerships, a second contained critical features associated with the success of partnerships, and the third included potential results of partnership efforts. (N.B.: When quotations are included, the affiliation of the informant is indicated parenthetically, i.e., "community" is a community representative to the JPAC.)

Definitions

Informants' definitions of partnerships tended to be general, rather than focusing on specific aspects of the CAGE project. Categories within the "definitions" domain related to the people in a partnership, the nature of partners' interest in project goals, and the process of coming together as a partnership to achieve the goals.

Descriptors such as "natural alliances" (community), "definite, natural connection" (business), "loose confederation" (university), and "consortium of individuals" (partner) were used to describe the group comprising a partnership. The partnership group was frequently described as cooperative or collaborative (school, university, community, state). For example, a university informant commented, "It doesn't involve jealousy, it doesn't involve one-up-manship. It really involves collegial

working together."

Equal status among members of the group was viewed as important (community, university, partner, staff). Such equality allows a partnership to maintain "a balance and a balance of views" (staff), which in combination with collegiality, allows a partnership to become more than the sum of its parts: "natural alliances formed to do some things that individually they could not do" (community).

Partnerships need a focus or goal, a reason for existing. The notion of members' interest or "stake" in the goals of the partnership was also a part of informants' definitions of "partnership." Several (school, community, partner, staff) stressed the importance of common interest in or commitment to the goals of the partnership, although the relationship between individual and group goals was also acknowledged:

> sublimating our own goals from time to time in order to accomplish a larger goal.... Each organization has its own organizational goals. We all have our personal goals. Somehow, those things have to be, through some sort of consensual process, brought together to form a cooperative or collaborative goal (partner).

Informants included other aspects of the partnership process in their definitions. One common descriptor related to

the dynamic, evolving nature of the process: "it's evolved... [as] continued adjustment in both our expectations as well as in the project itself" (partner). Developing trust was seen as an important factor in this evolution, especially among the partners in the project (i.e., CPS, KSU, IBM), as was "clear and open communication" (partner).

The notion of sharing was also frequently mentioned, although dimensions of sharing varied: "mutual sharing of expertise and mutual acceptance of ignorances" (university), shared decision making (community, partner), "distribution of the work effort" (partner). Sharing did not mean that everyone should do everything, however. One partner hoped that there would "not [be] so much joint decision making that nothing ever gets done." Similarly, a community representative explained that partners should "take some ownership for various pieces of the puzzle and come together and participate in consensus building with the larger issues that require consensus."

Several informants, particularly those from businesses or community agencies, used "teamwork" as to define the partnership process. This comment summarizes many aspects of informants' definitions of "partnership": "people working together under certain guidelines and constraints to address an agreed upon mission. It's very much like developing a team to be put on the field for the purpose of playing a game and winning" (partner).

Critical Factors Affecting Success

Data analysis yielded information about informants'

perceptions of the factors affecting success of the partnership. In contrast to comments in the definitions domain, which tended to be static, comments in this domain described the partnership in the process of achieving its goals. Four general categories emerged: people and relationships, investment and understanding, the partnership framework, and resources.

People and relationships. "Quality of partners" (staff) was seen as one critical factor affecting the success of a partnership. Effective partners have "personality, chemistry, and charisma... all [partners] are big stakeholders" (university). In addition, each has "some area of expertise that we are able to provide which would bring some new dimensions to the project" (community). A business informant agreed: "all are really powerful people within their domain. They have a lot to offer." The state representative added that persons chosen to represent their institutions on a partnership should be "high ranking" and have the "ability to impact on the community."

Relationships among partners were likewise viewed as critical. One partner commented that people should "know one another well and know one another's strengths and weaknesses well." Lack of such knowledge could become a barrier to success: "sometimes there's politics related to... previous interaction with certain people who are now a part of this collaborative, and if that's not known coming in, it's probably a little difficult to manage" (state).

Those interviewed seemed to agree that effective relationships take some time to develop. "The extent to which

people get involved between meetings" (partner) affects the development of relationships. Moreover, listening to each other (university, partner) and understanding differences were keys to the development of trust (staff, university, partners), seen as the basis of effective relationships. A university informant explained the importance of listening: "we need to be willing to let our defenses down individually and institutionally so we can learn from each other and not posture ourselves just to always look like we are the one with the answers." A partner put it this way:

> having an open mind and listening and dealing with things as not "better than" or "worse than," but simply "different than" is going to be the key to it all... and [that] means a lot of communication and kind of open-minded thinking.

A staff comment summarizes informants' perspectives within this domain: "trust and openness is evolving, it's growing, but it's going to take time."

Investment and understanding. A second category of factors affecting partnership success focused on partners' opinions and attitudes about project goals. Investment was perceived as occurring on two levels, from individual members and from their organizations. Informants thought that partners would be invested in project goals if they "feel valued as a member of the collaborative" (state); if they "can have some input and be a

part of the planning, they have more of a sense of ownership" (community). Informants acknowledged that individual needs or priorities within a project may vary, but seemed to agree that people should share a "common perception of where we're headed, that we see that each of us has a slightly different orientation on that perception, that everybody needs to get something out of this" (partner). Informants believed that developing and maintaining project focus is critical in promoting shared perceptions (business, community, partner).

Understanding project focus or goals, as well as individual roles within the larger partnership, was another critical factor. Partnerships will be successful if "each of us is on the same page" (community) and if "everybody has a clearly defined, meaningful, ongoing role to play in sustaining the effort" (university).

Commitment or investment from partners' organizations and others affected by the project was also perceived to be critical to partnership success:

> It's one thing for us to be on... the advisory council and make input. It's another thing-- because we may be making an input as individuals-- it's another thing for our institutions to embrace, endorse, and provide whatever kind of support it can provide (university).

Partners, staff, and the state-level informant echoed this perception of the importance of institutional investment. This

partner's comment suggests that investment must extend beyond the partnership to include those affected by it: "[success will depend upon] whether or not we have the investment of not just the teachers and the kids, but the investment of the principals, and the JPAC, and the leadership body...."

The partnership framework. The third major category within the "critical factors" domain contained descriptions of frameworks for effective functioning. Such frameworks, informants reported, should foster authentic participation: "if you want a project to be something that is participatory, you've got to ask people to do things" (partner). As suggested above, informants believed that authentic participation is dependent upon invitations from the leadership of a partnership: "I think it is the responsibility of CAGE to choose for the JPAC to be informed every step of the way so that the JPAC does not feel that it's a by-product. It certainly goes beyond courtesy, if we're talking about a partnership" (community).

Another important feature of the framework for partnership functioning is adequate time: "meaningful planning time, and time to develop programs" (school). Initially, time is needed for partners to clarify and specify their individual and institutional roles within the partnership: "need to define the role, relationship, function, contribution that each institution that's part of the JPAC makes to the project. Both conceptually and operationally..." (university).

Clear communication was yet another feature of effective partnership functioning. Several informants saw this

as a key to partnership success (community, staff, partner, business). "Clarity" (community), "listening" (staff), "keeping those lines of communication open" (partner), and negotiating or "give and take with all parties" (business) described clear oral communication. Clear written communication was noted as critical for external contacts: "the written communication to the different members has to be very precise because that will be what gets carried on from one person to the next within the organization" (university).

Communication was related to another key feature of effective partnerships: a workable process for making decisions and resolving differences. Many informants (community, state, partner, staff) expected occasional dissension in partnership efforts, for both personal and institutional reasons. Personally, "people who have historically worked independently may, in the initial stages of a collaborative effort, find it difficult to relinquish the final decision making to the group" (state).

Informants believed that conflicts might also arise because of differences in the cultures of members' organizations:

> the missions are different. Differences become barriers and intervening variables unless we understand the nature of the differing institutions... if we are sensible and sensitive to these differences, both institutional and individual, we will be able to keep

the project moving forward (partner).

In addition, differences in organizational dynamics or "ways of doing business" (partner) had the potential to lead to conflict or dissension, which could be avoided through understanding or accepting the differences:

> [it would] be a mistake to try to change the way somebody else does business. I think that, instead, what we need to do is look at how we can understand ... and know that that's a decision-making structure that you have to have, given that kind of an organization (partner).

In addition to expecting, understanding, and accepting differences, developing some comfort with conflict was described. A staff member commented about the importance of "developing the comfort level with conflict. Most people in our culture are not comfortable with conflict, and yet... there's going to be some conflict because you're bringing different groups together." A partner added, "There will not be immediate synthesis... There may be the need to disagree in order to come up with the best of possible decisions." Along these lines, ability to compromise and willingness to negotiate (staff, community) were viewed as necessary to promote effective decision making.

The expectation that roles, relationships, and interactions will change is implicit in many of these ideas about effective functioning. As roles are clarified and relationships develop, persons with diverse backgrounds and perspectives on a

common goal can learn to function in partnerships. The expectation of change, then, is a final critical ingredient for a framework to support partnerships. These changes, as noted above, occur among initial members in a partnership effort. However, the framework itself must be flexible enough to accommodate other changes: "we build in a consideration of change... [of] personnel... [including a] mechanism for keeping the project moving built in for sustaining our initiatives and our efforts" (partner).

Resources. Finally, informants talked about the resources necessary to support successful partnerships. Although financial resources were mentioned by partners, university, and community informants, other types of resources were mentioned more frequently. Chief among these was human resources, in terms of general participation (partner) and "meaningful community and parent involvement... neighborhood level and church level" (university). Professional expertise was also mentioned (partner, university, community): "We can certainly be a benefit to the JPAC through trying to track how it develops, where the problems are and how the problems get solved" (partner). In addition, facilities and materials were mentioned as critical resources to the success of a partnership.

Results of Partnership Efforts

Those interviewed agreed that a successful partnership should achieve its goals. Other potential or desired results, beyond the particular goals of a partnership project, were identified during the interviews as well. These addressed the

partnership itself, individuals comprising the partnership, and agencies involved in the partnership.

Several informants believed that a successful partnership can, and perhaps should, continue after its initial goals are met. A community representative commented, "There will be a defensible and definable and a healthily working unit that is currently not part of the Cleveland Public Schools." Similarly, a school district representative hoped that "this project must totally help people to continue to move forward, with or without the monies from the federal government." A university representative explained the process that may allow such partnerships to continue to function:

> when you're talking about partnerships, though, you also start to come up with individual partnerships... What an institutional partnership ... provides [is] a framework to allow these good mixes and matches to take place, so the task can go on. And when those break up, for one reason or another, others can take place. I mean, it's a way you set the course for a particular direction.

Implicit in the above description is potential benefit for individuals involved in partnership efforts, a second category within the "results" domain. Some individual benefit was seen as directly related to project goals: "[persons will

be] respected for the contributions they are making" (staff).

Other individual benefits included the notions of "networking... unlock doors... not just in knowing who to talk to, but what's available and how you go about accessing it" (partner). This networking might even benefit individuals within agencies who themselves are not directly involved in the partnership: "access to more resources through the JPAC... could open up other opportunities for [others]... which we didn't have before" (partner). A community member of the JPAC believed that individual participation in a partnership project afforded

> an entree to community resources... I think any entree that you can have as a function of group membership will be beneficial... the resources of some of the members of the committee with respect to their own contacts and what their own organization can provide, I think, reflects reasonable clout.

The third category of responses within the "results" domain contained potential benefits of partnership activities for the agencies involved. Several informants believed that participation in a partnership should result in "making the institution itself more vested and responsible for the success of your effort" (state), a process dependent on the "extent to which concepts or activities that are developed as part of the project are formally or informally incorporated into the agencies or

organizations that are involved" (partner).

Respondents also believed that an effective model of collaboration could be useful within other agencies: "the model that we're building here of cooperation is one that other school districts can use... I try and carry ideas from this project to other places" (partner). For example, a staff member commented that one JPAC representative was "thinking about his own organization... [he] can learn process and logistics and methods of collaborating ...." These ideas suggest the importance of documenting and sharing the process of developing a partnership so that participating agencies (and others) can employ the model in their own efforts.

Discussion

The 22 persons whose perceptions were described in this study represent schools, businesses, community and state agencies, and universities. Remarkably, their views about partnerships were similar. Themes arising from the research suggest that, for these informants, partnerships are dynamic, evolving entities which feature sharing and collaboration among persons of equal status. Informants also agreed that an effectively functioning partnership was somehow greater than or different from the sum of its parts.

Informants identified the types of people involved in partnership efforts as critical to project success. Good partners have power within their organizations, expertise to bring to the project, commitment to project goals, and collegial

inclinations. Individuals need to feel valued and to understand the contributions they can make to the partnership effort, both as individuals and as representatives of their organizations.

Partnerships cannot succeed without mutual understanding and respect for differences among individual members, attitudes which may take time to develop. Communicating clearly, creating a mind set for change, and establishing a framework for making decisions were seen as means to this end. Resources were considered essential, as well, but the types of resources identified went well beyond the financial.

Successful partnerships result in achievement of goals, but also in individual and institutional "spin-offs." The culture of collaboration created within an effective partnership enables future efforts by allowing people and organizations to discover natural connections and mutual interests.

To a limited extent, results of this study lend support to previous research. Careful communication, for example, has been identified as a critical component of successful partnerships (e.g., Shaklee et al., 1991). Moreover, Intriligator (1986) highlighted the importance of active participation as a vehicle for increasing commitment to a project and underscored the dual identities, individual and organizational, of persons involved in partnerships.

More important, results point to a new focus in the study of the partnership process: relationships and interactions among those involved. Informants clearly believed that knowing one another was critical to project success. Further,

understanding and appreciating differences in perspective on project goals and in interaction styles emerged as a major theme. It is possible, of course, that these findings are unique to the group studied. It is also possible that these perceptions may change, as informants gain experience with partnerships and as the CAGE project matures as a partnership. However, it is also possible that the findings are a function of the socio-cultural beliefs undergirding the research design.

This study sought an "insiders' view" of the partnership process. As Sirotnik (1988) points out, only this sort of critical inquiry about a specific partnership can reveal if the partnership is proceeding well, by making explicit "the assumptions, beliefs and agenda forming the foundation of partnership efforts..." (p. 175). If, as in the case studied here, informants' perceptions are similar, a framework for proceeding should be relatively easy to create. Markedly different perceptions, on the other hand, should probably be identified, discussed, and resolved, so that the partnership can function as a unit. In any event, the need seems clear to document and describe the partnership process as well as its activities (NAPE, 1991; Sirotnik, 1988).

By attempting to understand the process from the perspectives of persons involved in a partnership, the results of this study provide the beginning of a socio-cultural view of this important vehicle for educational reform. Given the differences in our insiders' perceptions of the importance of relationships and interactions in partnerships and previous, outsiders'

perspectives, more such study should be undertaken. Future inquiries should acknowledge the assumptions that meaning is socially constructed and context dependent.

The collaborative process inherent in partnerships has the potential to foster a genuine sense of shared responsibility for education and educational reform. Instrumental to the development of sustained, effective partnerships will be the detection and verification of those elements which contribute to success.

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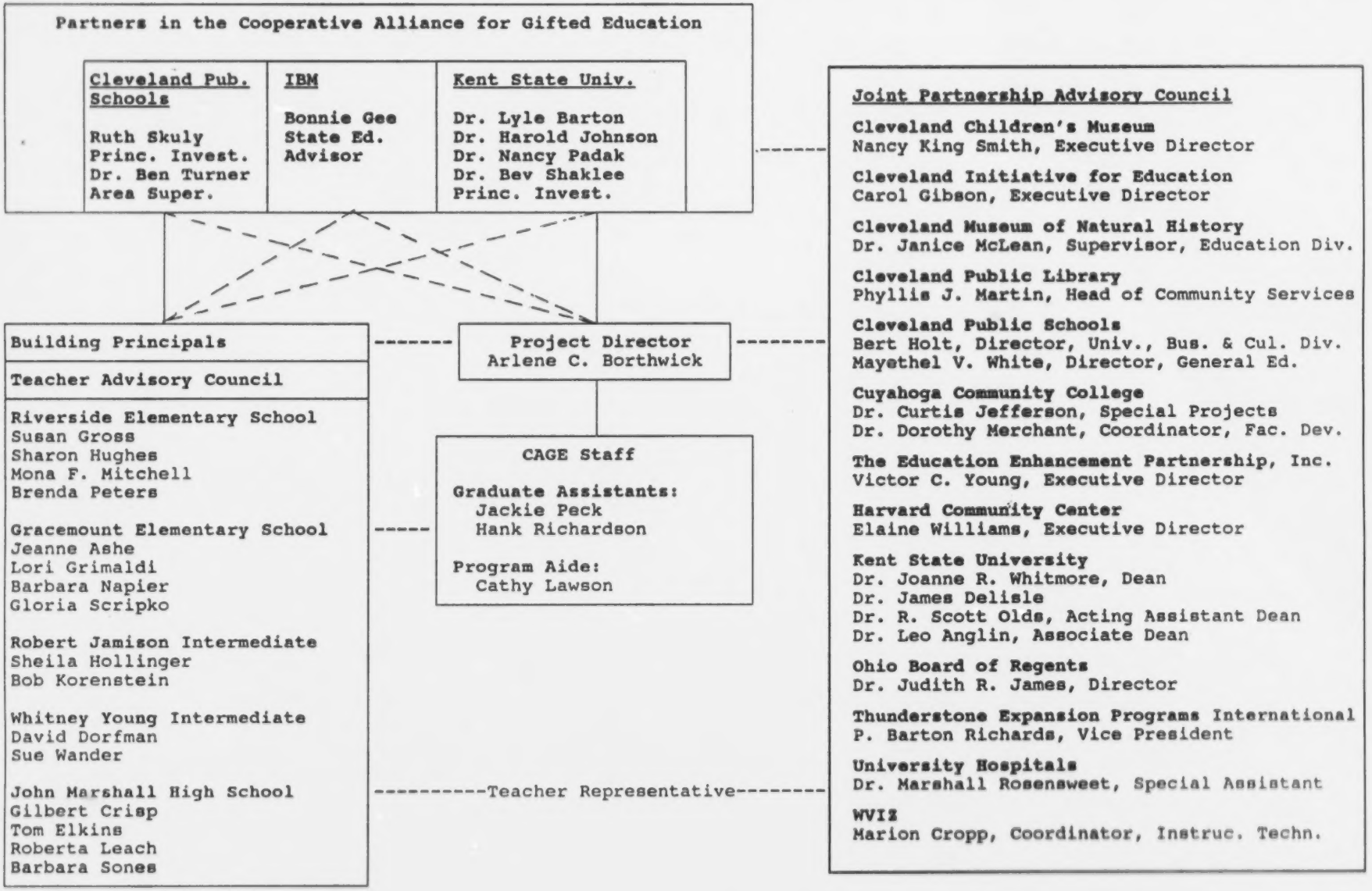
Figure 1. **COOPERATIVE ALLIANCE FOR GIFTED EDUCATION**



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